

10-2012

Launching the Search for the Wreck of HMS *Colibri*

James D. Spirek

University of South Carolina - Columbia, spirekj@mailbox.sc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/sciaa_staffpub



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#)

Publication Info

Published in *Quarterly Reporter*, Volume 3, Issue 3, 2012, pages 10-11.

<http://www.cas.sc.edu/sciaa/>

© 2012 by The South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology

This Article is brought to you by the Archaeology and Anthropology, South Carolina Institute of at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty & Staff Publications by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu.

Historical Marker Honors Shipwreck

By Carl Naylor, SDAMP

How many of you—raise your hands—have driven over the Cooper River bridge toward Mount Pleasant and wondered what that shipwreck was in the shallows on the east side of the river? No, that's the USS *Yorktown*. I'm talking about the long thin abandoned vessel that looks like it was made from cement.

Well, mystery solved. According to the Mount Pleasant Historical Society who has recently erected an historical marker near

Patriots Point honoring the vessel, it is the *Col. J. E. Sawyer*.

Commissioned as a river steamer for the U. S Army Quartermaster Corps, the *Sawyer* was built in 1919 by the Newport Shipbuilding Corporation of New Bern, NC. The 700-ton *Sawyer* was 128.5 feet in length and, the marker claims, was able to carry 500 passengers (something I find hard to believe looking at the remains).

Its claim to fame is in being the first American-built

passenger vessel made from concrete, actually something called ferrocement.

According to the marker: In 1923, Joseph *Sable* brought the decommissioned *Sawyer* and an identical ship the Maj. Archibald Butt to Charleston for commercial use. In 1926, the *Sawyer* sank near Adger's Wharf creating long-term problems for port authorities who dubbed her the "old sunken hull." As thousands cheered, the *Sawyer* was raised on June 22,

1929, after weeks of frustrating yet amusing attempts. The old hull was towed to this site and remains an iconic fixture. Local lore named this steamer the Archibald Butt; however, that vessel was relocated to Miami in 1925.

According to news accounts, no one knows why this confusion over the name persists. Are they kidding? You've got to admit "the Maj. Butt" is a much more memorable name. ■



The USS Yorktown

The Sawyer today



Launching the search for the wreck of HMS *Colibri*

By Jim Spirek, SC State Underwater Archaeologist

On 23 August 1813 during the War of 1812 the British warship, HMS *Colibri* (16-gun) wrecked on Martins Industry Shoal off Port Royal Sound, South Carolina. *Colibri* and another British warship had spent the previous two days in the sound attempting to suppress inland navigation between Savannah and Charleston, harassing American militia units on St. Helena Island,

and raiding abandoned plantations. Sailing out to sea *Colibri* grounded on the shoals fringing the channel and finally remained fast on the main bar. The warship attempted to lighten its load by jettisoning iron ballast and ordnance overboard and float over the sandbar, but to no avail. A hurricane on 27 August caused the stricken warship to break into three parts. No salvage attempt is

known to have been made at the wreck site shortly after the incident or at any other time. The warship then simply faded into the sands of the shoal and time.

Recently, the MRD attempted to locate the remains of the British warship at the entrance to Port Royal Sound. On Monday, 17 September, we deployed a cesium magnetometer and a

Humminbird 997c side scan sonar unit to begin the search for the warship. Our search area began along the entrance channel and then spanned across Martin's Industry Shoal to the northeast. Quartering the waves headed southeasterly and gently rolling with the waves headed northwesterly, the survey boat completed 30 one-mile long

(Continued on page 11)

HMS Colibri (Continued from page 10)

transects over a width of 655 yards over a portion of the shoal. Several magnetic and acoustic anomalies were detected in the survey area. One magnetic anomaly, however, seems connected to the near-by channel buoy, while one acoustic anomaly appears to be a modern vessel. Bearing the appearance of a square-transomed shrimpboat, measuring approximately 70 ft. in length and 17 ft. in breadth, the lack of a significant magnetic signature seems problematical, unless salvagers recovered the outriggers, engines, and the hull was built of wood rather than of steel/iron. Additional post-processing of the electronic data is ongoing, but we do not believe the location of *Colibri* was detected in this brief foray on the shoal. Despite the negative data, we at least know where it's not, and will continue radiating out in our attempt to locate the British warship.

Originally, we had planned to spend two days searching for the wreck and then spend a day diving on visible anomalies that seemed good candidates for the wreck. Discounting a harbinger of the engine issue to come while motoring out to the shoal, blaming it instead on floating spartina reeds getting entangled in the propellers, we had a good day surveying. Then the engine problem manifested itself after completing the day's survey. Anticipating an hour trip back to the ranch, the port engine started slipping out of gear when going over 3000 RPMs. To make a two-and-a-half hour story shorter, we at least made it home. Inclement weather the next day provided a perfect time to try and get the engine repaired which appeared to be related to corrosion in the shifter cable. Unfortunately, no boat repair establishment had the necessary 26 ft. sized cables on hand. Soliciting a boat mechanic's opinion regarding the advisability of using and perhaps further damaging the engines, and receiving positive assurances, we decided to continue surveying, but only going at a speed of 2000 RPMs, and staying inside the sound waterways.

Besides looking for *Colibri*, we had planned on going to Station Creek to look for the elusive other half of the Floating Machine Shop. The Floating Machine Shop was formed by lashing together two hulks, originally intended for the stone fleets off Charleston, but instead were diverted to create a naval repair facility for the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron during the Civil War. In the early 2000's, we had located one of the shipwrecks in the creek, which we believe to be the ex-whaling vessel *Edward*, but not the other vessel, *India*. As a final Swan Song for Chris Amer, who had just retired, we hoped to get closure by finding the wreck. Relying on the Humminbird side scan sonar, we surveyed along the shoreline of both sides of the creek. Since we had a full day instead of the anticipated half-day to spend

looking for *India*, we also went searching along the shoreline of Hilton Head Island for two other stone fleet vessels that were purposefully sunk near the Tee-dock during the Civil War. We also had time to gather additional sonar on the Skull Creek Wreck, perhaps another Civil War-era vessel.

While post-processing the sonar data from Station Creek that evening, an intriguing sonar anomaly appeared in the sonogram. The anomaly appeared to resemble a pretty good acoustic image of a ballast mound. Despite the seemingly proof positive that this was a shipwreck, we had some trepidation about identifying it conclusively as such, since we had already been burned once before when diving down in the creek on the anticipated ballast mound and instead finding numerous oyster clumps descending along the bottom. Despite any uncertainties about the identity of the acoustic anomaly, we decided to dive the site the next day before heading our separate ways to Columbia and Charleston. Ashley and I dove on the site, after slicing through the several knot current on the incoming tide, to find a mound of rocks. Searching along the perimeter and the top of the ballast, and finding timber and several copper-alloy fasteners, seems to confirm that the elusive other half of the Floating Machine Shop has been located. Once cast asunder, they are now intertwined in the archaeological record and available for future research endeavors. Ashley enjoyed the dive, as it was her first experience in zero visibility seeing bioluminescence zooming by her mask.

Despite the mixed results of not spending as much time as hoped for looking for *Colibri*, the shifting of focus to close the loose end in Station Creek, and looking for some new sites made for a productive four days. It also provided us a last endeavor with the recently retired State Underwater Archaeologist, Chris Amer. We look forward to continuing our work, as there are still many shipwrecks to find in Port Royal Sound. ■



Side scan image of possible square-transomed shrimpboat